

# The Washington Post

## Editorial

### Running on Empty

How remarkable to discover so much interest in fuel economy standards.

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PERHAPS NOTHING is more symptomatic of Washington's energy policy failure than the bipartisan, bicameral, executive-legislative, multi-decade refusal to reexamine fuel economy standards for passenger cars (known as CAFE standards). For years now, the subject has been almost too politically toxic to mention. Laws requiring cars to get better mileage have been on the books since the 1970s, but they have hardly been updated since the 1980s. In the 1990s, Congress passed annual appropriations measures designed to prevent President Bill Clinton from even studying whether standards should be raised. Multiple attempts to put higher fuel standards in recent energy legislation have failed. So long has it been since anyone tried hard to do so, in fact, that even officials directly responsible for the issue are unclear about what the law really says and who has the authority to change it.

Now, suddenly, fuel economy standards are all the rage. Speaking in Biloxi, Miss., on Thursday, President Bush said he would like Congress to "give me a capacity to raise CAFE standards on automobiles." Actually the president apparently does have the capacity to raise fuel economy standards, but only, according to the White House, in a manner that is economically inefficient and risks making cars more dangerous. The administration did, it is true, rewrite the fuel economy standards for light trucks (albeit by less than 3 miles per gallon between now and 2011) and did ask Congress back in 2002 for the authority to reform the current law. But Congress didn't respond, and the president didn't push. Put simply, the issue has been nobody's priority.

Now the transportation secretary has written to congressional leaders, asking again for a legislative change, and a House committee has decided to hold hearings. In the context of other suggestions floating around the Hill, these are positive developments. Consider the alternatives: Republicans proposed this week to compensate for high prices with a \$100 rebate for every taxpaying American, just about enough for two tanks of gas in an average sport-utility vehicle. Democrats and Republicans alike meanwhile spoke of suspending the 18.4-cent tax on gas for 60 days, which would cost at least \$6 billion and have no impact on the underlying problem. Members of both parties supported various forms of penalties for oil companies that, while perhaps satisfying for consumers, don't exactly herald a long-term solution to what the president has called America's oil addiction.

A discussion of fuel economy standards is a better approach, or anyway it's better late than never. After all, if fuel economy standards had been raised a decade ago, less of this flurry of activity would be necessary today.